NEEDS AND ORGANIZATIONS:

THE CASE FOR THE PHILOSOPHICAL TURN

Cristina Neesham

PREAMBLE

The concept of 'needs' is foundational to any philosophy of human nature, rationality and human action. Beyond philosophy, many other disciplines such as psychology, economics, sociology, political science, social policy, ecology and sustainability, have engaged in ample research programs to address needs. Organization research makes no exception: its long history of interest in needs requires a separate monograph. At work, just as anywhere else in life, needs are omnipresent – yet in theorizing about needs no task has been more difficult than defining them.

To complicate things further, the term 'needs' carries a heavy common use baggage, which tends to cloud rather than assist our understanding. In everyday English, for instance, we use 'need' in ambiguous ways, in which the idea of lacking something necessary, useful or desirable combines with that of a motivating factor eliciting action to compensate for what is lacking. However, this amorphous list of vague (sometimes conflicting) interpretations does not capture the distinctive moral and political strength of claims associated with the concept of 'needs' as used in philosophy and most other fields of inquiry. Here, 'needs' claims catalyze efforts to create social institutions whose explicit *raison d'être* is to satisfy them. Such institutions are symptoms of our higher regard for social orders in which human dignity, freedom and meaningful life are protected and nurtured.

Based on this humanist agenda, it seems reasonable to expect that the study of organization should focus on the creation of more effective organizations, according to these criteria, as a matter of overriding concern. Yet, as suggested in this chapter, the history of 'needs' research in this field is far from consistent with a humanist agenda. Driven by a philosophically questionable connection with motivation, in organization research the concept of 'needs' has been vaguely and ambiguously employed to serve different (and sometimes conflicting) interests. In the competition for legitimacy between the needs of employees and the 'needs' of the organization, instrumental managerialism, marking the priority of the latter over the former, has triumphed.

By encouraging a thorough exploration of the nature of needs, of their social construction and its ideological effects, philosophy can restore a primary interest in the potential of organizations to meet human needs. The purpose of this chapter is not to fully recount how needs have been conceptualized and theorized in either organization research or philosophy but to highlight the less explored contributions that philosophy can make to challenging organizational instrumentalism and to reviving the humanist agenda in the study of needs in organizations.

This chapter begins by presenting a selection of key philosophical perspectives on needs, and then identifies some entrenched assumptions in the study of needs in organizations which, I argue, should be challenged. I then suggest some ways in which philosophy can be applied within organization research to unsettle these assumptions and forge new directions of thinking on this topic. Comments on further readings are also included.

NEEDS IN PHILOSOPHY

A considerable amount of philosophical thought has been channelled into defining the concept of 'needs'. When we appeal to needs as representing what is necessary, we tend to interpret this necessity in one of two very different ways. The first refers to what is needed relative to a pre-stated goal, of any kind; the second is about needs for avoiding serious harm (Thomson 2005) or, more broadly, for living a worthwhile life (Flew 1977). Engaging needs as instruments of goals that may lie outside the horizon of reflection is a dangerous prospect: surely, the Nazi regime needed many large gas chambers and sophisticated management systems in place in order to successfully carry out its social policies. It is, therefore, the second meaning of needs that is more useful, as it substantiates moral and political claims that can be generalized and, at the same time, provides a secure conceptual connection with humanist purposes, thus keeping the normative debate in sight. But, as the discussion of needs in organizations will show, awareness of both meanings is important in understanding the propensity of our arguments to oscillate uncritically and therefore allow instrumentalism to overtake humanist projects.

Beyond safeguarding against the threat of instrumentalism, our interpretation of the source and nature of needs requires further investigation for other reasons as well. It is important to consider, for example, whether needs are objective, i.e. derived from given facts of nature, or whether they are (inter)subjectively determined through a collaborative creation of the meaning of 'what is necessary', within a certain understanding of the human condition and of its essence that is upheld in an individual's conscience and/or shared within a community.

In this context, it does not help at all that needs have often been confused with wants, desires, drives, motives and interests. Unlike *wants* and *desires*, for instance, needs are considered to have some empirical basis outside the wishes of the experiencing subject (Bay 1968, Marcuse

1964). They point to what is essential to living a worthwhile life, independently of what we may wish for at a particular point in time: thus, we may want things we do not need (or even things that cause us harm), and we may not want things we do need (Minogue 1963). Wants, as signals routinely expressed in economic exchanges, gratify our sense of having, which is not essential to our whole-of-life purposes. By contrast, needs refer to satisfying our sense of being and doing, which are essential in this way: nutriments for survival and labour as self-creation are such examples (Marx 1932/1975). This distinction is important in legitimizing ways in which needs can be said to be 'objective'.

Furthermore, unlike *desires*, as conscious psychological states of wanting which can be insatiable, and unlike *drives*, their unconscious and much less controllable counterpart (Lacan 1977), needs are finite, in that they are satisfied as soon as harm is avoided, and inescapable, in that they lead to harm when undiscovered and unsatisfied. In addition, underneath Maslow's (1954) axiomatic connection between needs and motivation lies another crucial conceptual distinction: while *motives* are emotionally and/or intellectually experienced reasons to act (Hume 1738/1978), needs may indicate the imperative of harm avoidance independently of the subject's experiences (Doyal and Gough 1991, Thomson 2005) – which opens the possibility that others may understand our needs better than ourselves, as well as the possibility that we may be impaired, by various internal and external factors, in our ability to understand our own needs.

But perhaps the most important and difficult distinction is between needs and *interests*. It has been said that needs respond to one's core interests (Thomson 2005). We define our interests precisely in relation to what is good for our purposes, and core interests in terms of what is good for furthering our whole-of-life projects (Flew 1977). However, when defined by the imperative to avoid harm, needs are understood as a special kind of interests, leading to powerful moral and political claims of a special kind (Minogue 1963). Needs connect with

rights much more strongly than interests (Brock 2005), especially when both needs and rights are understood in universal terms, e.g. basic physiological needs such as food, water and shelter (Maslow 1954); and basic psychological needs such as affiliation, achievement and power (McClelland 1975) or autonomy, freedom and dignity (Ciulla 2000).

Beside the humanist emphasis on an intrinsic relationship between needs, avoidance of harm and achievement of a worthwhile life, three philosophical themes are of particular interest as potential contributions to the study of needs in organizations: the objective versus subjective nature of needs; the existence or non-existence of a privileged locus of knowledge from which needs can be understood and evaluated (and, within this, the role of the experiencing subject); and, the subject's moral tension between agency and dependence. The last two themes, in particular, have a political dimension of central importance for organization research.

On whether needs are objective or subjectively experienced, the debate has often been fuelled by an unproductive dichotomy. While, at one end of the spectrum, nutrition can be regarded as an objectively necessary condition for physical survival – at the other end, needs for belonging and companionship, for instance, make little sense outside the evaluation of the experiencing subject. Both extremes are equally essential for living a worthwhile life, and there are also essential hybrids in between (e.g. security). Sen (1999) transcends this dichotomy by focusing on the process of evaluating needs. In this context, he defines needs as things that we have 'good reason to value' (Sen, 1999: 11) and develops a perspective on needs in which empirical evidence and value judgment stand in a dialectical relationship.

However, making sense of a needs evaluation process rests not only on assumptions about the nature of the needs in question but also about the knowledge credentials of the evaluator. This raises the issue of who (if anyone in particular) is best placed to understand one's needs and

therefore undertake an authoritative evaluation – whether it is experts (drawing their referent authority from a variety of sources), politicians, policy makers, philosophers, the public, communities, or individuals as experiencing subjects. For Marx (1845/1970), needs are socially constructed. In a strong sense, they are historically determined by the social order and its class structure. Consequently, just as needs are inescapable, so is the political dimension of needs claims.

According to Habermas (1987), the flourishing of the human life-world should be the objective of a thorough analysis of political processes. It is only through communicative action that power differences are made explicit and an ethic of autonomous human fulfilment can have a chance. By democratizing the ways in which we construct and communicate meaning we are more likely to respond to our genuine needs and escape institutionalized alienation and oppression. But, while progressive in its political awareness, this perspective still assumes a sovereign subject, able to confidently assert their agency and have full control of their life and its meaning(s). In emphasizing the unconscious dimension of needs, Lacan (1966) questions this assumption, pointing to internal barriers to self-understanding.

To this, postmodern philosophy adds two relevant discussions of external barriers and their internalization. As power structures and relations shape the very constitution of knowledge (Foucault, 1975/1995), our ability to independently know and understand our own needs is threatened. In fact, there is doubt as to whether individuals can even possess this ability in a consumer society, which uses discourse to constantly induce in individuals symbolic needs for social recognition and affirmation (Baudrillard, 1970/1988). Language, which is perhaps the most intimate conduit for our thoughts, is also a received body of signs and meanings structured by dominant ideologies. This suggests the absence of an Archimedean point from which the individual can autonomously experience their needs.

Baudrillard's conclusion, however, does not erode the individual's political claim to sovereignty. On the contrary, the tension between the imperative of protecting this sovereignty (Habermas 1971, 1987) and acknowledging the inescapable dependence entailed by needs claims (Lacan 1966, Thomson 2005) now takes a different turn. While, in mainstream liberal political thought (e.g. Hayek 1960), assumptions of full agency become a barrier to interest in needs, as the associated dependence is considered to be a source of paternalism and humiliation (Flew 1977), in postmodern thought awareness of the necessity to live with contingency (Heller and Feher 1988) gives new strength to the experiencing subject's voice in expressing needs as moral and political claims.

NEEDS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Traditionally informed by industrial psychology research, organization studies of needs rely on theories that assume a necessary link between needs and motivation (e.g. Maslow1954, McClelland 1975). The managerial project, therefore, involves using needs as a predictor of human behaviour, in order to recommend best ways to harness employee motivation to benefit the organization and its goals. In the aftermath of the human relations movement initiated by Mayo (1933), most psychological studies of human needs in organizations maintained interest in human needs only insofar as it was compatible with other organizational interests. One step further, it was human needs that were being used to satisfy organizations, rather than organizations being engaged to meet human needs. Morgan (1997) recounts how the concept of 'needs' was incorporated by some systems theories within a metaphor of the organization as organism. This had the effect of humanizing the organization at the expense of de-humanizing the people who participated in it. As suggested by Grey (2013) and Watson (2013), later theories (e.g. Burns and Stalker 1961, Lawrence and Lorsch

1967) identified factors other than needs (e.g. organization culture) as drivers for individual motivation. These findings, combined with the conceptual subordination of needs to motivation, paved the way for a replacement of needs studies with corporate culture research. Significantly, overemphasis of the needs-motivation nexus has obscured the relationship between needs and harm, which is central to a humanist perspective.

More successful in retaining a humanist focus on harm avoidance has been the adoption of concepts from development and welfare economics, in particular Sen's (1985) capability approach, on organizational justice and bottom-of-the-pyramid business strategy research – but such studies are far less widespread.

Beyond the uncritical instrumentalism that dominates needs research in organization studies, the theoretical frameworks employed in support of this research tend to entrench a set of philosophical assumptions that should, instead, be radically challenged. One such assumption emphasizes the objective aspects of needs over the subjective ones, with the effect of weakening the authority of the experiencing subject in the evaluation and interpretation of their needs. This also legitimates a second assumption, namely the existence of a privileged locus of knowledge about needs, which may be found in the manager, the organization, or the positivist empirical researcher who operates with the best instruments to apprehend such objective reality. Finally, this privileged position is assumed to be impartial and, as a consequence, glosses over political implications of the research process itself, despite the evident regularity of recommendations provided in the service of managerialist projects of the organization. The ideological effect of the organization developing discourses that promote full individual agency is, paradoxically, an increase of the individual's dependence on the organization. For example, 'soft' people management dominated by corporate culturalism only allows for individual discretion under the patronage of organizational goals. This leads

to a silencing of the critical capacities of the employee to appraise and change their work situation independently of the organization's imperatives (Alvesson and Willmott 1992).

A radical challenge of the above assumptions can only occur through a systematic engagement with philosophical perspectives that revisit the role of subjectivity in needs evaluation, question the existence of privileged knowledge about needs, and engage with the moral tension between agency and dependence.

Some attempts at challenging these assumptions have indeed been made. Of Marxist inspiration, labour process theory (Willmott 1997, Rowlinson and Hassard 2000) has occasionally been combined with welfare philosophy to theorize on meaningful work (Michaelson et al. 2014). Moreover, in undertaking a compelling critique of liberal political thought, Yeoman (2014) proposes a reconceptualization of meaningful work as a fundamental human need. Foucauldian analysis of power-knowledge relations has also been applied to rethink the psychological and social needs of workers in team work (Sewell 2005).

Other attempts, while providing pertinent critique, fall short of engaging in a comprehensive study of needs. For example, in response to Kuchinke (2010)'s call for placing human development – and, with it, Sen's capability approach – at the centre of human resource management practices, Fenwick (2011) observes that, even under explicit humanist priorities, a perspective that privileges objective over subjective dimensions of needs and overlooks the political factors at play in defining needs remains just as vulnerable to instrumentalism as traditional human resource management theories.

Townley (1995) uses Foucault's (1988) distinction between self-awareness and self-formation as technologies of the self to deconstruct 'management discourse as the interpretation and satisfaction of needs' (Townley 1995: 273).

Adding to the critique of corporate culturalism, Hancock (1999) revisits psychological theories of human needs and their link with motivation, using Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality to question our ability to understand our own needs independently of dominant ideologies of consumption. As objects dominate the subject, the only way to escape is to become indifferent to the world of objects and consumption and to avoid emotional investment in sign value and sign exchange.

In sum, the above critiques suggest that there is much more to be said about needs, at a fundamental level, in the study of organizations, in ways that challenge the traditional paradigm.

THE FUTURE OF NEEDS

Philosophy can inform alternative perspectives on needs, by supporting the development of a humanist sensitivity to the vulnerable 'self' – a self who may not be autonomous, and not in full control and knowledge of their own needs, but nevertheless retains a political entitlement to sovereignty. In this context, the role of the organization is not to occupy the position of expert but to acknowledge and assume responsibility for the subtler, ideological, ways in which it induces human suffering, through the co-optation and colonization of discourses about needs.

While systemically edited out of the organization's discourse, this suffering is real. The current discourse of individual needs and agency, voiced by the organization within the framework of its goals, is inevitably reductionist, leaving the complex individual longing, speechless, for a space that has the power to dissent from the priorities of organizing. The individual thus suffers from an inability to pursue unpredictable experiences as a free and complex human being, as well as from an inability to articulate this suffering within the

boundaries of the established discourse. This kind of suffering is an indicator of what the organization, as a social system, leaves unattended to, and unsatisfied, in the people who spend their lives in it. In this context, applying a revised version of the Marxian concept of radical needs, to develop an alternative perspective on organizations and organizing as sources of social change, may prove useful.

According to Heller's (1974) synthesis of the Marxian theory of need, radical needs are needs that, necessarily, cannot be met by any needs-satisfying systems provided within the institutions of capitalism. The satisfaction of radical needs thus requires a revolutionary transformation of the economic system, e.g. from an economy of material production to one of leisure time, based on a different approach to surplus value distribution (Marx 1862/1969). With the benefit of directly experiencing socialism as dictatorship over needs (Heller et al. 1983), philosophers of the Budapest School, Heller in particular, have filtered the concept of radical needs through postmodern reflection, thus usefully replacing Marxian deterministic premises with a view of the individual's existential and political condition as contingent (Heller and Feher 1988).

Leaving aside the all-encompassing, macro level ambitions of Marx's grand narrative, the idea of transforming social systems to satisfy (rather than perpetuate) radical needs may be productive when adapted to the level of needs-satisfying systems in organizations. In the interpretation proposed here, radical needs, which by necessity cannot be satisfied by the existing modes of organizing, contain the seed of change. Exploration of radical needs satisfying systems would thus support innovative humanist projects at organizational level, leading to alternative modes of organizing. Research of radical needs responsive organizing may provide a fertile, constructive direction following philosophical critiques of traditional needs studies.

In response to the issue of privileging objective over subjective dimensions of needs, the concept of radical needs focuses, from its Marxian inception, on abundant examples of harm derived not from purely objective sources but anchored in the social experiences of the subject. The human needs associated with these experiences are both real and fundamental to living a worthwhile, fully human life (Marx 1932/1975). Furthermore, on the existence of a privileged locus of knowledge about needs, Heller rejects this implication of Marxian needs theory and suggests, instead, a postmodern ethic that enables the individual to live and develop their humanness in a world where there are no absolute points of reference, where our only perennial epistemic and political condition is contingency (Heller and Feher 1988). Despite the loss of ultimate authority on needs evaluation, distinguishing between needs and wants is still, logically (Thomson 2005) and ethically (Heller and Feher 1988), possible. On the moral tension between agency and dependence, focus on radical needs should combine Lacan's (1966) perspective on (un)conscious needs as defined by appeal to another for their satisfaction with Heller and Feher's (1988) investment in the agency of the subject as the liberating (albeit daunting) effect of assuming a contingent world. By developing practices of radical needs responsive organizing as grassroots movements, by taking ownership of these systemic change processes, people in organizations may be better able to acknowledge their dependence on one another through empowerment rather than humiliation.

These alternative modes of organizing may actively respond to radical needs by providing opportunities for developing talents, enduring relationships and rich experiences as catalysts of new life projects. Therefore, an organization should: allow space for existential self-critique and, with it, for critiques of its goals, systems and structures; renounce assumptions of interests alignment and accept a plurality of terms on which different individuals choose to engage with it; and recognize the right of any individual, irrespective of their status and

position, to open new spaces for self-determination, of themselves and others – by nurturing reciprocal (rather than hierarchical) relations.

Whether the postmodern organization, imagined as a work environment adjusted for the open-ended self-realization of complex human beings, is at all possible is a matter for validation by both theory and practice. Whatever the answer, philosophical reflection remains indispensable to challenging the dominant paradigm and forging new ways forward in the humanist study of needs in organization research.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

From an organization research perspective, Grey (2013) provides an insightful account of the place of needs theories in the history of organization studies, between scientific management and corporate culturalism. From a philosophical perspective, Doyal and Gough's (1991) theory of universal and objective needs is prefaced by a set of counterarguments to several schools that criticize the basic needs concept, thus providing a useful sketch of the debate about the objective versus subjective dimensions of needs. More philosophical debates around needs are summarized in Reader (2005).

For further theory building, Heller and Feher's *The Postmodern Political Condition* (1988) is recommended, as it offers a refreshing interpretation of the human condition in today's world, theorizes on needs satisfaction post consumer society and develops a political agenda on this basis. For the time-pressed reader searching for a thematic synthesis of needs theories across domains and paradigms, Dean (2010) offers some useful taxonomies.

References

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (1992) 'On the idea of emancipation in management and organization studies', *Academy of Management Review*, 17(3): 432-464.

Baudrillard, J. (1988) *Selected Writings*. (ed. Mark Poster). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bay, C. (1968) 'Needs, wants and political legitimacy', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1(3): 241-260.

Brock, G. (2005) 'Needs and global justice'. In Reader, S. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 51-72.

Burns, T. and Stalker, G. M. (1961) *The Management of Innovation*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Ciulla, J. B. (2000) *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work.* New York: Random House.

Contu, A., Driver, M. and Jones, C. (2010) 'Editorial: Jacques Lacan with organization studies', *Organization*, 17(3): 307-315.

Dean, H. (2010). *Understanding Human Need: Social Issues, Policy and Practice.* Bristol: The Policy Press.

Doyal, L. and Gough, I. (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fenwick, T. (2011) 'Developing who, for what? Notes of caution in rethinking a global H(R)D: a response to Kuchinke', *Human Resource Development International*, 14(1): 83-89.

Flew, A. G. N. (1977) ‘Wants or needs, choices or commands’. In Fitzgerald, R. (ed.), *Human Needs and Politics*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Foucault, M. (1988) *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst, Mass: University of Massachussets Press.

Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Grey, C. (2013) *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Organizations*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Habermas, J. (1971) *Knowledge and Human Interests.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hancock, J. (1999) ‘Baudrillard and the metaphysics of motivation: A reappraisal of corporate culturalism in the light of the work and ideas of Jean Baudrillard’, *Journal of Management Studies*, 36(2): 155-175.

Heller, A. (1974) *The Theory of Need in Marx*. London: Allison & Busby.

Heller, A., Feher, F. and Markus, G. (1983) *Dictatorship Over Needs*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Heller, A. and Feher, F. (1989) *The Postmodern Political Condition*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hume, D. (1738/1978) *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. A. Selby-Bigge (2nd edn). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kuchinke, P. K. (2010) 'Human development as central goal for human resource development', *Human Resource Development International*, 13(5): 575-585.

Lacan, J. (1966) *Écrits*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1977) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. London : The Hogarth Press Ltd.

Lawrence, P. R. and Lorsch, J. W. (1967) 'Differentiation and integration in complex organizations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12(1): 1-47.

Marcuse, H. (1964) *One Dimensional Man*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Marx, K. (1975) 'The economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844'. In Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1975) *Collected Works*. Vol. 3. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1845/1970) *The German Ideology*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Marx, K. (1862/1969) *Theories of Surplus Value*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Mayo, E. (1933). *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Maslow, A. (1954) *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper.

McClelland, D. C. (1975) *Power: The Inner Experience.* Oxford: Irvington.

Michaelson, C., Pratt, M., Grant, A. and Dunn, C. (2014) 'Meaningful work: Connecting business ethics and organization studies', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 121(1): 77-90.

Minogue, K. R. (1963) *The Liberal Mind*. London: Methuen.

Morgan, G. (1997) *Images of Organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Reader, S. (ed.) (2005) *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rowlinson, M. and Hassard, J. (2000) 'Marxist political economy, revolutionary politics, and labor process theory', *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 30(4): 85-111.

Sen, A. (1985) *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science.

Sen, A. K. (1999) 'Democracy as a universal value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10(3): 3-17.

Sewell, G. (2005) 'Doing what comes naturally? Why we need a practical ethics of teamwork', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(2): 202-218.

Thomson, G. (2005) 'Fundamental needs'. In Reader, S. (ed.), *The Philosophy of Need*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 175-186.

Townley, B. (1995) '"Know thyself": Self-awareness, self-formation and managing', *Organization*, 2(2): 271-289.

Watson, T. (2013) *Management, Organisation and Employment Strategy: New Directions in Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.

Willmott, H. (1997) 'Rethinking management and managerial work: Capitalism, control, and subjectivity', *Human Relations*, 50(11): 1329-1359.

Yeoman, R. (2014) 'Conceptualising meaningful work as a fundamental human need', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 125(2): 235-251.